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SUBJECT: INDEPENDENT WEEKLY CLOSED FOR PRINTING MOHAMMED  
CARTOONS

Classified By: AMBASSADOR GEORGE KROL FOR REASONS 1.4 (B,D)

11. (C) Summary: The Supreme Economic Court first suspended and then closed the independent weekly "Zgoda" for reprinting the Mohammed cartoons as part of a commentary on the violent protests the cartoons had sparked in the Islamic world. The GOB, siding with Belarusian Muslims, condemned the cartoons as an attempt to incite religious hatred and discord. Zgoda editor Alexei Korol, who is also a senior campaign manager for opposition candidate Aleksandr Kozulin, said that the paper's closure was a political move to further limit Belarusian citizens' access to independent media before the elections. In a nationally televised speech at the Third All-Belarus Assembly, President Lukashenko promised to close the newspaper and jail its managers. End Summary.

Supreme Court Closed Weekly "Zgoda" Over Mohammed Cartoons  
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12. (U) Supreme Economic Court (SEC) judge Oksana Mikhnyuk upheld the Ministry of Information's (MOI) appeal to first suspend (March 7) and then close (March 17) the independent weekly "Zgoda" for repeated violations. (Note: Zgoda is a publication associated with the Belarusian Social Democratic Party "Hramada" which is led by opposition presidential candidate Aleksandr Kozulin.) On February 22, the newspaper received its second official warning from the MOI for violating Article 5 of the Media law after it reprinted several of the satirical Prophet Muhammed cartoons that first appeared in the Danish daily newspaper Jyllands-Posten. The cartoons, however, were part of a larger article about the deadly protests and violence in the Islamic world that were sparked by the cartoons. On February 22, the Belarusian Committee for State Security (BKGB) instituted criminal proceedings under Article 130 of the Criminal Code for "incitement of racial, national or religious enmity or discord," after searching the newspaper's headquarters, seizing four computers and interrogating editor Alexei Korol and editor-in-chief Aleksandr Sdvizhkov.

Zgoda Editor Defends Publication, Calls Attack "Political"  
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13. (C) After condemning the KGB's investigation as "a political move," Korol told Poloff on February 24 that at the same time the KGB was interrogating him and his editor-in-chief, Belarusian state TV was running a report about the KGB's search of the Zgoda offices, suggesting that

the state TV had prior knowledge of the KGB's search and seizure plans. At that time, Korol, who is also a senior member of Kozulin's campaign team, reassured poloff that neither his paper nor Kozulin's image would suffer from this attack since the reputations of both are already well-established.

#### Zgoda Editor Links Closure to Elections, Calls Trial Unfair

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14. (SBU) After the trial, Korol linked the Zgoda closure to the presidential elections, saying that the SEC's decision was part of the authorities' plan to eradicate independent media before the elections. Korol said that the authorities consider even feeble attempts by the independent media's to disseminate information to the people to be a threat to the regime.

15. (C) Korol reported that the trial lasted only 50 minutes and that the judge did not carefully examine all the information. For instance, Korol claimed that the judge ignored the fact that he was outside of Minsk when the issue came out and the fact that Korol stopped the issue's circulation and destroyed the remaining copies when he found out about the article. (Note: The newspaper printed approximately 3,000 copies of the issue, but distributed less than 25 per cent of them. On February 24, Korol told poloff that he had "no problem" with the article, but stopped distribution because of the reaction to the cartoons, although he claimed that these cartoons were not exactly the same cartoons that appeared in the Danish newspaper, but were cartoons that made fun of the original cartoons. Poloff obtained a copy of the issue and the cartoons appear to be the same cartoons that appeared in the Danish newspaper.)

#### Belarusian Muslims Condemn Cartoons, Praise GOB Response

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16. (C) Chief mufti of the Belarus Muslim Association Abu-Bekir Shabanovich condemned Zgoda's publication of the cartoons. On March 7, he publicly welcomed the criminal proceedings that had been launched against Zgoda, describing the authorities' response as justified and appropriate. He went on to praise the long-standing peace between the religious faiths in Belarus and expressed his hope that "those who have broken the law would be brought to justice."

#### GOB Officials Promised to Close Paper, Launch Criminal Case

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17. (U) On March 3 in his nationally televised closing speech to the Third All-Belarus Assembly, President Lukashenko promised that the newspaper would be closed and that its managers would go to jail. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs showed equal disdain for the newspaper in its February 22 statement that condemned the publication of the caricatures on Prophet Mohammed in Zgoda as an intentional act to incite religious discord and fuel resentment and distrust between ethnic and religious minorities living in Belarus. The MFA statement claimed, "Support of inter-confessional peace is one of the basic priorities of the Belarusian state." The statement promised that the MOI would ask the Prosecutor General's Office to launch a criminal case.

#### Future of Zgoda and Korol

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18. (C) When Poloff inquired about Korol's plans for Zgoda on March 19, Korol said that the future of his paper would depend largely on what happens in Belarus following the elections. Korol mentioned that he has friends who would help him publish his paper, perhaps under a different name. Korol also told Poloff that if the GOB takes further actions against him after the elections, he would try to seek a refugee visa to the U.S., saying, "immigrating is better than going to jail."

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